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ABSTRACT

There is a growing disillusion with social science evaluation and the role it has played in the conduct of massive social programs. In retrospect, it appears that the social science evaluations of the past decade were undertaken with impossibly high ambitions and relied upon restrictive assumptions concerning the functions that evaluation serves in governmental processes. The dominant model has taken evaluation to be an activity which functions to alter and enlighten the pursuit of programmatic goals. Such a view is too narrow and may actually be misleading. Other functions of evaluation can be identified, including conflict resolution and complacency reduction. Recognition of these functions leads to a desire for differently structured evaluations; but such evaluations can not be conducted without changes in the pattern of evaluation funding and in the composition of the evaluation community. This recognition also suggests that the evaluator may have more options than he or she realized. (Author/RC)

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RATIONALITY TO RITUAL: THE MULTIPLE ROLES OF
EVALUATION IN GOVERNMENTAL PROCESSES

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Rationality to Ritual: The Multiple Roles Of
Evaluation in Governmental Processes
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There is a growing disillusion with social science evaluation and the role it has played in the conduct of massive social programs (Speizman, 1974; Horowitz, 1975; Orlans, 1971; Williams and Evans, 1969; Cohen, 1975). In retrospect, it appears that the social science evaluations of the past decade were undertaken with impossibly high ambitions and relied upon restrictive assumptions concerning the functions that evaluation serves in governmental processes.

The dominant model has taken evaluation to be an activity which functions to alter and enlighten the pursuit of programmatic goals. Such a view is too narrow and may actually be misleading. Other functions of evaluation can be identified, including conflict resolution and complacency reduction. Recognition of these functions leads to a desire for differently structured evaluations; but such evaluations cannot be conducted without changes in the pattern of evaluation funding and in the composition of the evaluation community. This recognition also suggests that the evaluator may have more options than he realized.

The Decisionistic Model

Conventional wisdom concerning the relationship between evaluation and governmental processes emphasizes the impact of evaluation upon discrete decisions made by public managers. The language of various proponents of evaluation varies, but three fundamental assumptions regarding goals, information and utilization appear and reappear (Stufflebeam et al., 1971; Popham, 1975; Provus, 1971; Alkin, 1969; Stake, 1967):

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- I. Goals. Social Programs are enacted with stable, consensual, publicly proclaimed goals. Politicians initiate programs with these goals in mind; the programs function to achieve these goals.
- II. Information. Evaluations serve to collect information on the way in which programs function and on the effectiveness of programs in meeting proclaimed goals. This information will reveal any discrepancies between program performance and goals.
- III. Utilization. Decision-makers and program managers will utilize evaluative information to make discrete, identifiable decisions intended to improve programs. Decision-makers and managers are constantly in search of ways to improve program performance.

Because the dominant theme of these premises is that evaluation aids in making discrete decisions, these three premises will be called the decisionistic model of the function of evaluation.¹

The decisionistic model depicts governmental and social systems, under the influence of evaluation, as highly adaptive. Information about government performance, measured against widely shared goals for public policy, is quickly fed back into the policy making process where "course corrections" are made.

The decisionistic model is a familiar one in the literature of evaluation. Although it is cast here in simplistic terms, this description captures many of the basic ideas which motivated both program-planning-budgeting systems (PPBS) and the drive for rational decision making in government (Hitch, 1970;

¹This name was suggested by Martin Rein.

Schultze, 1968; Rivlin, 1971; Riecken and Boruch, 1975).

Many nationwide evaluations designed to fit this model have been conducted. For example, in the field of education, we now have documentation on evaluations of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (McLaughlin, 1975), Follow Through (Elmore, 1972, 1975), Head Start (Williams and Evans, 1969), Head Start Planned Variation (Rivlin and Timpane 1975) and performance contracting (Gramlich and Koschel, 1975). The effects of these evaluations are not those predicted by the decisionistic model. As Cohen and Garet say:

In general, efforts to improve decision making by producing better knowledge appear to have had disappointing results. Program evaluations are widely reported to have little effect on school decisions; there is similar evidence from other areas of social policy. The recent national experiments in preschool and early childhood education (Headstart Planned Variation and Project Follow Through) do not seem to have affected federal decisions about priorities within such compensatory programs. There is little evidence to indicate that government planning offices have succeeded in linking social research and decision making (1975, p. 19).

Part of the apparent failure of evaluations to influence decisions is probably due to the inconsistent quality of the evaluations conducted. But consideration of the premises of the decisionistic model suggests that even "good" evaluations may fail to aid decision-makers.

The Goals Premise

It is naive to assume that governmental decisions are made primarily in accordance with universally accepted goals (Orlans, 1971). The goals of public policy often involve private, conflicting objectives in addition to public, consensual ends. Politicians and bureaucrats experience immense

difficulty in defining the "public interest." Further, they are concerned about the interests of the particular groups with whom they identify and from whom they derive political support.

Evaluators usually report to a heterogeneous, rather than homogeneous, audience. The evaluator who chooses to measure the performance of social programs against public rhetoric offers little to decision-makers with private or narrowly political aims. For example, the report on whether student achievement improves in schools that use paraprofessionals is likely to say little to administrators who value the program because it provides local employment and increased political support.

The diversity of ends served by public policy should not be viewed as a pathology, however. Few goals have majority support. Hence, public programs can only be established by appealing to the partly divergent goals of a number of groups. The goals written into legislation will be sufficiently vague to allow various constituencies to read in their own goals. As David Truman said, "ambiguity and verbal compromise may be the very heart of a successful political formula" (1951, p. 393).

The Information Premise

It is naive to assume that the information collected in an evaluation will always reveal discrepancies between program performance and goals. Evaluations have faced numerous difficulties in obtaining believable results (for examples of these difficulties, see Campbell and Erlebacher, 1971; Gilbert, Light and Mosteller, 1975).

Outcomes of the programs are obscured by the complexity of the social context in which they take place; furthermore, the public goals often change

during the course of the evaluation.

Since social programs can seldom be isolated from the rest of society, the outcomes measured are affected by many factors not intentionally included in the program. Since the effects of factors such as the strength of the national economy and the whims of local governments may have large, unknown impacts on the outcome measures, the evaluation may be unable to isolate and assess the effects specific to the program. In many cases, this problem is compounded by the inability of the evaluator to randomly assign subjects to program and control groups. In this case, the program effects are also confounded with pre-existing group differences.

Prospects for discovery of discrepancies in the short run are further compromised by the growing realization that it is time consuming to carefully design and execute evaluations which can detect accurately the small effects of many new social programs. A decade may be required for the testing, design, and implementation of programs on an experimental basis (Rivlin and Timpane, 1975). In this time quite different program goals may have evolved; but the carefully designed evaluation may only be able to detect discrepancies between program effects and the previous, now obsolete, goals.

While it is optimistic to assume that an evaluation will collect useful information, the decisionistic model is restrictive in its assumption that evaluations function only to collect information. Evaluators usually collect information on the activities and effectiveness of programs; but this is not all they do. Evaluations are often large scale programs in their own right, affecting the lives of people in the program, and providing support for those in the evaluation industry. Considering evaluations only as sources of information may lead to a failure to recognize substantial effects of evaluation efforts.

The Utilization Premise

Are organizations constantly in search of ways to improve their performance? Organizational theorists say not (March and Simon, 1958; Cyert and March, 1963; Steinbruner, 1974). Rather than continually seeking "optimal" performance, organizations search for new ideas and practices only when current performance falls below "satisfactory" levels. For governmental organizations, "satisfaction" ordinarily disappears only when external pressure causes substantial discomfort within the organization. An agency is content to maintain "business as usual" unless public pressure focuses on problems in its domain. At such a time, the organization is likely to search for ways to improve its programs, or at least alter public perceptions of its programs. The organization will usually start by using strategies which have previously helped to reduce public pressure. Some of these strategies use information regarding program performance and effectiveness.

The public, however, is extremely fickle in its concerns. Each social problem rises into public view, captures center stage for a time, and fades away to be replaced by the next fashionable issue (Downs, 1971). Each problem area, such as health or education, experiences alternating periods of public concern and public neglect. For example, the urban riots of 1967 sparked a public determination to "do something". When the costs of ameliorating the conditions of black ghettos were realized and initial steps did not deliver rapid social improvement, the public became bored with media coverage of street mobs; issues of urban decay fell into neglect.

Once public excitement passes, the stimulus to improve services fades as well. Evaluations commissioned in the first blush of program operation are of little interest when completed, if the public has turned to other issues. Although evaluations are not predestined to irrelevance, utilization depends

on the chance conjunction of available results, public concern, and bureaucratic receptivity. In the majority of cases, this conjunction does not occur and the evaluative evidence is filed, not used.

The utilization premise can fail in another way. The time required for evaluative evidence to influence decision-makers is considerably longer than the decisionistic model implies (Cohen and Garet, 1975). While the decisionistic view assumes that evaluations will provide information for a particular decision in the short-run, the decisions that are actually affected may come much later. A decision-making structure consists of roles and relationships, sets of beliefs and values, commitments already accepted, and courses of action already in progress. Plans can rarely be altered until current commitments have been met. Only when plans are open to influence can the evaluator's report have impact. Further, the ultimate impact of evaluations often depends on altered belief structures; such alterations may come only after a series of studies has confirmed initial findings.

Belief in the efficacy of compensatory education was not substantially shaken by the first adverse evaluation; a multitude of evaluations, conducted over the period of several years, did erode such beliefs. The possibility that evaluative results can alter policy in the short run is seriously diminished by the inertia of the decision-making structure.²

²The likelihood of delay in acceptance is not symmetrical with respect to evaluative results. That is, it may require longer for negative results concerning program impact to "sink in" than is required for the acceptance of positive results. Given the rarity of "positive evaluations," however, there remains a high probability of the need for cumulative results.

Limitations of the Decisionistic Model and Some Alternatives

The foregoing recitation is not intended to bolster an assertion that evaluations never fit into a decisionistic framework. It is plausible to assume that evaluators are sometimes called upon in situations where program goals are consensual, consistent and operational; where evaluative results can be reported while managerial interest is still high; where the program directors are free to consider a wide range of alternatives; where new alternatives can be implemented within standard operating procedures and where the utilization of evaluation does not require a reversal of deeply rooted attitudes. But no one should be surprised when some or all of these conditions are absent. When such conditions do not hold, the evaluation will fail to perform the function outlined by the decisionistic model.

But we need not conclude that such evaluations serve no useful social function. Evaluations may influence governmental processes in ways not envisioned in the decisionistic model. Evaluations have at least two additional functions. These functions may be served whether or not the decisionistic model is applicable.

Evaluation as Conflict Resolution

Evaluation can be viewed as a means for managing conflict so as to promote gradual social change. Evaluation is a signal that the program under study is subject to further negotiation and compromise. When groups with opposing views on a program agree to a test of its worth, they commit themselves to some compromise related to evaluation results. Social experimentation and evaluation resemble political debates. Candidates with strongly differing opinions will

refuse to discuss issues with each other, each hoping for total victory. When they agree to debate, they acknowledge the worth of at least some part of their opponents' position, and acknowledge their willingness to compromise. Likewise, a shift in the debate from program strategies to evaluation strategies indicates that both sides of the debate have tacitly agreed to investigate at least one new program.

In a similar vein, evaluations in the form of social experiments often act to produce social change. Differing parties may agree to a social experiment, each side feeling confident that the results of the experiment will help consolidate their position. But part of the experiment, however, is the creation of a pilot program; such pilot programs seldom disappear at the end of the experiment. Thus the conduct of a social experiment often leads to some form of social change, regardless of the outcome of the experiment (M. B. Floden, 1974).

Evaluation as Complacency Reduction

The very act of participating in an evaluation may spur the consideration of new practices by practitioners - managers, teachers, probation officers, social workers. Participation in evaluative efforts can prompt both the clarification of standard operating procedures and their revision.

Such complacency reduction serves at least two purposes. First, while working with the evaluator to determine how to measure program success, program participants clarify program goals. Second, participation in evaluation can lead to the rejection of previous goals and to the stimulation of alternatives. In the complacency reduction model, evaluation serves as a prod to program participants; it leads them to be clear about what they are

trying to accomplish and to consider alternatives to the complacently accepted verbal goals.

The complacency reduction model resembles organization theory models of participatory decision-making. These models make two distinct claims for gains from employer participation. The strong claim is that decisions made with greater employee participation are likely to be better decisions. The weaker claim is that the quality of life in the organization is improved, i.e., everyone is happier with the decision made (March and Simon, 1958).

The advantages of complacency reduction suggested above fall under the strong claim, e.g., complacency reduction leads to greater clarity and more alternatives, which in turn leads to a better program. The weaker claim suggests the additional benefit of an increased satisfaction with the administration and evaluation of the program.

The "Eight-Year Study" sponsored by the Progressive Education Association in the 1930's provides a classic example of complacency reduction (Smith and Tyler, 1942). In this instance, the evaluation effort had as its purpose the direct involvement of teachers in the formulation of program goals, the collection of data concerning performance, and the consideration of alternatives. The final project report only presented the various instruments and exercises (developed jointly with teachers) and eschewed the presentation or analysis of data. The impact of the evaluation was achieved not through conclusions or advice to management but through the involvement of program participants in the asking of questions about their own activities.³

³A recent study of evaluative impact in California's educational system noted a similar effect of on-site visits by evaluation teams from the State Department of Education (Berke et al., 1976).

Some Implications

Evaluations may serve to shape managerial decisions, to resolve conflict among policy elites, and to reduce complacency among program participants. Any particular evaluation is likely to function, to some extent, in each role. An adequate assessment of the impact of evaluation upon governmental processes must take notice of all these functions.

The decisionistic model has so dominated theoretical discussion of evaluation that other perspectives have been neglected or ignored. The model has had a deep imprint on recommendations designed to enhance the positive contribution of evaluation in the development of social programs. Thus, for example, advocacy of social experimentation clearly presumes the decisionistic model. Yet, the roles of evaluations in resolving conflict and reducing complacency are also important. The extent to which public officials understand and value these other evaluative functions is unclear. The rhetoric of the process through which evaluations are commissioned is dominated by the decisionistic model. "Requests for Proposals," the prime bureaucratic device for procuring evaluations, speak only of the gathering and analysis of data and the marshaling of evidence in the form of written reports. Put simply, the dominant pattern of thought that lies behind the commissioning process has been limited by the decisionistic model.

The skills that can be easily summoned from the professional evaluation community are biased when compared to the diverse functions served by evaluative effort. Experts in testing, econometrics, opinion surveys, quantitative analysis and the techniques of proposal writing and report preparation are in ample supply. Those with interpersonal skills, with skills in drawing out assumptions and hidden goals, and with training in arbitration and mediation are less in evidence in the institutions that conduct evaluations. Evaluators are drawn

almost exclusively from the fields of psychology and economics; fields such as political science, history and anthropology are underrepresented. The skills of the evaluation industry will continue to be restricted to the narrow and traditional domains of experimental design and regression analysis until government officials are prepared to expand the skills summoned in the commissioning process.

The process of change cannot take place from the bottom up. Local administrators of publicly funded programs find it difficult to justify hiring evaluators with "non-standard" skills. Middle management in a controversial social intervention will find it difficult to facilitate conflict resolution. Similarly, such administrators are often in an awkward position to stimulate complacency reduction. This suggests that performance of the non-decisionistic functions of evaluation can be improved only through encouragement at higher levels of government.

The recognition of these additional functions also has implications for the evaluator. Although he may assign different priorities to the fulfillment of the various functions, the evaluator can make a contribution in more than one way. If he is unable to contribute information to any discrete decision, he may change his emphasis to complacency reduction or the mediation of conflicts. The evaluator tied to the decisionistic model may experience only frustration, while the evaluator with a wider perspective may find satisfaction with the results of his work.

Policy-makers and professional evaluators may be uncomfortable with a depiction of evaluation as an exercise in arbitration or complacency reduction. Their discomfort is evidence of the influence of scientism in thought about the relation of social science to government. The evaluation of governmental processes may profit from analogies with the scientific laboratory. But the

Laboratory is no more an apt metaphor than the psychiatrist's couch or the bargaining table. Our vision of evaluation and our repertoire of evaluative behavior must attend to each.

Two paths diverge from the current state of affairs. Down one path lies an increasing acceptance of evaluation as a vehicle for questioning existing institutions and practices. The work of Ralph Nader and his colleagues is the exemplar in this respect. Down the other path lies an increasing willingness of evaluators to join in efforts to bring conflicting policy elites into at least temporary agreements concerning the next programmatic steps to be attempted.

We urge a schizophrenic stance of fostering both. Governmental processes need to be subjected to more intensive questioning; mechanisms are also needed to contain the resulting conflicts.

Evaluation as Ritual: A Speculation

This discussion has not exhausted the possible functions of evaluation, but has merely drawn attention to previously suggested functions. We wish to suggest yet another function of evaluation, albeit a speculative one.

Evaluation may be seen as a ritual whose function is to calm the anxieties of the citizenry and to perpetuate an image of governmental rationality, efficacy and accountability. The very act of requiring and commissioning evaluations may create the impression that government is seriously committed to the pursuit of publicly espoused goals, such as increasing student achievement or reducing malnutrition. Evaluations lend credence to this image even when programs are created primarily to appease interest groups.

The picture of a committed government serves two functions. First, it

improves the image of public officials. In both democratic and authoritarian systems political leaders must appear to be confident, efficacious and "in control" if they hope to produce any changes (Arnold, 1935; Ellul, 1965). The government needs public cooperation to conduct any large scale program. This cooperation is most likely to be forthcoming when the government maintains the impression that it can cope with problematic situations. When this appearance cannot be maintained, cooperation may disappear, and no government solution to the problem will be possible. Thus, government effectiveness is improved by the conduct of evaluations, whether or not the results are actually used.

The impression of government rationality also promotes a feeling of security in the citizenry. Societal problems are often magnified by the media to the point where a crisis seems imminent. The threat of crisis leads to a widespread sense of helplessness and hopelessness. Evaluations serve to combat this feeling by fostering the belief that the government is acting on everyone's behalf to find solutions to pressing problems. The publicity given to these efforts reduces the level of public anxiety, whether or not evaluations produce useful information.

Evaluations may also serve as a focal point for the reduction of complex social problems to a choice between relatively well defined alternatives. This reduction of apparent complexity acts both to make the problems seem manageable and to give citizens the sense that they have a firm understanding of the issues involved (Ellul, 1965).

Ironically, the ritual functions of evaluation are best fostered by not acknowledging their existence. These functions depend on the creation of a particular impression; such an impression may be destroyed by announcing the intent. Just as one defeats the intent of a propaganda broadcast by announcing, "We will now attempt to portray Russia as a world menace," one destroys the

impression of government competence by commissioning an evaluation for that express purpose. Nonetheless, evaluations may serve this function; in cases where this function is particularly desired (albeit not acknowledged) its action may be promoted by increasing the publicity given to the existence of the evaluation.

Note that the ritual function is not conspiracy of the governing to deceive the governed. It is a ritual in which individuals at all levels of governance participate in some way in order to bolster a common faith.

Cries of the failure of evaluation have assumed only one narrow model of the function of evaluation. This model represents only a part of the whole picture. Evaluation serves functions of complacency reduction and conflict management; it may serve other functions as well.

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